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Planning to Write a China Book? Just Say No

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We wrote to Jonathan Watts to ask him to write a commentary on the book tour he's been on to promote [When a Billion Chinese Jump](#), which included a stop at UC Irvine, but he said he was too busy being whisked from champagne receptions to meetings with Hollywood directors seeking to buy the film rights to the book to craft something suitable. Watts was, however, good enough to offer us permission to run (in slightly trimmed-down form) a piece he wrote—with tongue firmly in cheek—for a 2009 issue of the newsletter of the Beijing Foreign Correspondents' Club. Composed while he was working on [When a Billion Chinese Jump](#), it explores all the reasons why a journalist should resist the siren call of writing a China book:

By Jonathan Watts

Don't do it. Stop now, before it is too late.

This is my advice if you are thinking of writing a book. It may sound a mite negative, but believe me, I write from bitter experience out of compassion for my fellow man.

In my case, it started innocently enough: A flattering email from an agent that played on my ego and a vague ambition to become an author. I thought long and hard for, oh, what? about a minute and then, yes, yes, why not.

I persuaded myself I had noble motives. It really wasn't the promise of fame and fortune, it was the chance to do something worthwhile, to dig deeper into a subject than the day-to-day news agenda allows.

Don't get me wrong. I love our trade. Journalism is a search for the truth on expenses. But isn't there also an element of the job that makes us treat knowledge like disposable plastic cups? We fill our heads with facts, figures and comments in the hours or—if we are lucky—days before deadline. Then we empty out all the juiciest bits into our stories and discard what is left to make mental space for the next subject.

That, of course, is the also the beauty of what we do. No high-falutin dreams of eternal glory for us. Nope, we are so in harmony with the mutable and the down-to-earth that we are throwaway, we are garbage. Today's newspaper is tomorrow's chip wrapper, as they used to say in the UK. (That was before health-and-safety standards were tightened. Newspapers today are not considered good enough even for chip wrappers.)

But I have a confession. As the years go by, I increasingly crave depth, longevity. I know it is wrong. Really, I feel guilty. The journalistic gods know I have tried to fight it. But it's no use. The book demon won't go away. I have become, gulp, earnest.

So earnest, in fact, that not only did I take the plunge into the book world, but I picked that most earnest—and least likely to be a bestseller—of subjects: the environment.

My friends, bless them, tried to save me. Why waste your time, they said. There's no money in books, they said. The last thing the world needs now is another journalist writing a book about China, they said. One acquaintance even started a club for China correspondents who are not writing books. It is the only club in Beijing that gets smaller every year, he said.

But I didn't listen.

It really isn't for the money. By March 2009, I must write 120,000 words. The advance is less than a fifth of the amount a freelancer could earn writing that many words at New York rates.

Add in the extra grief with family, friends, employers and it is a truly rank return on the investment of time and emotion. My life has been turned upside down. At every step I have created expectations of myself that have proved impossible to live up to. Instead, I discovered hidden talents of procrastination. I tried spending a couple of hours on the book each day before work. Total failure. Kind (pitying?) friend have provided refuges in the wilds of Norway, Japan and the Chinese countryside. The result? I've developed a penchant for new distractions of weeding, cooking and cycling.

Oh yeah, and then there is the book beard, the hair I must bear until the bloody thing is finished. What a stupid idea that was. But thanks, dear friends for your supportive comments. I count myself lucky that you are still willing to be seen in public with someone that you have variously described as having the facial hair of a Unabomber, Bin-Laden, gulag inmate, Karl Marx, Worzel Gummidge, tramp and scrumpy drinker. My children have forbidden me from attending their school until it is shaven.

But will that day ever come? On my darkest days, alone, starting at my laptop, I begin to doubt. The deadline is looming. The daily word count is rising. With each day that passes, I fear I will go to my grave with an unfinished book on my hard drive and an unruly thicket on my chin.

In desperation, I have sought advice from wiser heads, all published authors—[Paul French](#), [John Gittings](#), [James Kynge](#), [Rob Gifford](#), [Richard McGregor](#), [Catherine Sampson](#), [Zhang Lijia](#), [Phil Pan](#), [Alexandra Harney](#). Their answers were inspiring, though I wish I had heeded their warnings at an earlier stage. In brief, I have condensed their advice to 10 commandments.

- 1) **MOTIVATION:** Don't start unless you are utterly committed to your subject and prepared for your life to change (Everyone).
- 2) **TIME:** Don't think about combining a book with regular work. Take a long sabbatical or sign up to a university course (Gifford).
- 3) **MONEY:** Make sure you have a financial cushion, especially if you have a family. Writing and doing original research cost time and money (McGregor).
- 4) **RYHYTHM:** Follow Graham Greene and set realistic daily targets (Kynge 384 words per day, Zhang 500, and McGregor 703). Or alternatively, write when the mood strikes and occasionally endure marathons until your forehead hits the table with exhaustion (Gifford).
- 5) **MOMENTUM:** If film making is about bums on seats, then book writing is about words on the page (Gittings). You have to keep your "run-rate" up to avoid a last minute rush (McGregor).
- 6) **CRAP:** Don't stop to clean up the crap. Leave that till last. Books are sculpted as much as written (Gittings, Kynge, Gifford, McGregor, Hemingway).
- 7) **ISOLATION:** Avoid the internet—or strictly ration your daily use (Sampson, McGregor).
- 8) **EXERCISE:** Exercise before starting each writing session to purge the pacing urge (Sampson).
- 9) **AMBIENCE:** If you like to work with music, avoid anything with vocals (Sampson).
- 10) **HELP:** Show the manuscript to a frank friend who will tell you just much crap you need to cut or clean up (Gifford, Harney).

Closest to my own feeling at the moment is Paul French's advice to "Forget it" unless you are pervertedly obsessed. In my case, it comes too late. The pain of this bloody book has exposed a truly masochistic streak—I even sometimes enjoy it. Though this probably isn't the type of perverted obsession Paul was referring to.

I am now locking myself away in an empty factory-studio in north Beijing, where there is nothing to do but stare at the concrete walls and stroke my ever lengthening beard. Oh, yes, and write. I really must so more of that. Less than four months left and 80,000 words to go . . .

So apologies if I seem a bit anti-social over the coming weeks. Please allow for the stranger than usual behaviour and appearance. Forgive me if I occasionally neglect duties to family, club and company.

Our esteemed published colleagues assure me it will all be worth it in the end. I hope so. I really do. But in the meantime, please sympathise—and learn from this pathetic wretch. Just say No.